

AL FARO ZAPATISTA COLLECTION

***Los Tercios Compas.***  
**Autonomous Zapatista**  
**Audio-Visual Communication**

Axel Köhler





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# *Los Tercios Compas.* **Autonomous Zapatista Audio-Visual Communication**

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**CUCSH**  
CENTRO UNIVERSITARIO DE  
CIENCIAS SOCIALES Y HUMANIDADES



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Made in Chiapas, Mexico

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# LOS TERCIOS COMPAS. AUTONOMOUS ZAPATISTA AUDIO- VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Axel Köhler

## ***Los Tercios Compas: Our Anonymous Gaze***

*Silently, without revealing themselves, without prizes, without press credentials, Los Tercios Compas fulfil their duty to watch us with our own gaze.*

SUBCOMANDANTE INSURGENTE GALEANO (2015B: 242)

**O**n 10th August, 2010, in La Realidad, Chiapas, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) held a press conference with the “free, autonomous, alternative, or whatever-you-call-it media,”<sup>1</sup> which was transcribed by *Los Tercios Com-*

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<sup>1</sup> See *Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano* (2014).

*pas*.<sup>2</sup> The members of this collective took advantage of their transcription work to add notes in parentheses that demonstrated their knowledge on the topic. They provided bibliographic references, but they also corrected and complained several times, “somewhat pissed off because of all the blunders,” to “the speaker” when he referred to that collective as *los tercios medios* (“the third halves” or “the third media”) —we do not know whether tongue in cheek or by mistake.

During the conference, Insurgent Subcommander (*Subcomandante Insurgente*) Galeano spoke first, providing a series of reflections on the various types of media in existence today in the capitalist system. First, he characterised the corporate media as “paid media.” He referred to the Mexican press in particular. He described in detail its function and its traditional printed distribution —now in decline. Then he outlined its readers’ profile, pointing out that they belong mostly —between 60% and 70%— to the more affluent classes. He also indicated the key role of advertising for generating income in that sector, whether with ads for commercial products or government propaganda. Insurgent Subcommander Galeano also examined

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<sup>2</sup> The name of the collective is a witty play of words that is impossible to translate into English. In Spanish, *medios* can mean either “media” or “halves.” *Tercios* means “thirds.” *Compa* is a gender-neutral, shortened form of *compañero* or *compañera* (somewhat like “comrade”), which is how Zapatistas call each other and those who share their struggle and ideals. Thus, *tercios compas* is meant to imply that they are *compas*, i.e., Zapatistas, but that they are (playfully) “less than,” or different from, the media. (T.N.)



the ways journalists work. These reflections led to the following important point:

The paid media exist, they are real, they have a certain importance. This importance is gradually diminishing, and what the EZLN has done is radically change its media policy. [...] which will consist in the Zapatista media asking the questions and you providing the answers, rather than the other way around. [...] What we are interested in is talking and listening to you, and by that, I mean the people who talk and listen to us through you (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Galeano 2014: n.p.).

There is another significant reason for this radical change in the Zapatistas' media policy:

So, the problem the whole world has is that if there is no longer information, nor analysis, nor research in the communications media—if there indeed at some point ever were— then where are we going to find these things? There is a gap, then, in the media sphere that is currently in dispute (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Galeano 2014: n.p.).

The people who inform us about what is happening in the world and who reveal what remains hidden, “those who have truly disrupted the world of information are the collectives where the individual is completely dissolved, like Anonymous” (ibid.) or WikiLeaks.<sup>3</sup> The most substan-

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<sup>3</sup> Legal authorities and the mass media focus their attention on Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks. Insurgent Subcommander Galeano stresses that this organisation is a collective. We can add that

tial contributions in communication do not come from star journalists whose name is often more important than the information they provide, but from collectives whose members remain anonymous:<sup>4</sup>

Summing up, what we have seen is that the anonymity of the collective is coming to replace and to put into crisis that eagerness of those above to focus on individuals and personalities. [...] In the paid media, what matters is who does the reporting. [...] The exclusive. [...] In contrast, I would like to think that in the collectives to which you belong and in others that couldn't come, the way you work makes the information more important than who produced it (*Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano* 2014: n.p.).

Anonymity has also been one of the characteristics of Zapatista audio-visual communication since 2014, as it does away with credits and lets us know that it is produced by a Zapatista collective or media “agency” whose members sign as *Los Tercios Compas*. The covers of the DVDs sold in the Zapatista *Caracoles*<sup>5</sup> carry this moniker, and so do the

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the US government, using an old political strategy of eliminating leaders to dismantle social movements, has sought to identify personal responsibilities in order to try Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning for their disclosure of state secrets, i.e., espionage and treason.

<sup>4</sup> At first, some female insurgents who reported for *Los Tercios Compas* signed with their names, but anonymity soon prevailed.

<sup>5</sup> The *Caracoles* (“Snails” in English) are the organisational regions of the Zapatista autonomous communities created in 2003 and replacing the previous form of organisation, the *Aguascalientes*, in order to reor-

photographs and videos that accompany the communiqués published in *Enlace Zapatista*. This is also the case of their videos uploaded to YouTube. Sometimes, the productions carry the collective's logo: a cat-dog with a balaclava marking its territory below and to the left.

At least one more clue is necessary to understand why a Zapatista communication collective such as *Los Tercios Compas* (hereafter LTC) exists. It is “the need to develop our own gaze watching ourselves” (*Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano* 2015b: 241), i.e., a gaze of their own, a critical Zapatista gaze to communicate and reflect on the movement's processes from within.

There is one more seemingly paradoxical issue: according to their own self-understanding and self-definition, LTC are neither free nor autonomous. Let me explain. The mainstream, corporate media, the “paid media,” have reported on Zapatismo, especially when the news provided spectacular headlines. The “free, alternative, autonomous, or whatever-you-call-it media” has also worked *with* Zapatismo and reported *about* it, to make known the movement's substantial advances in the areas of education, health, and political autonomy, as well as to report on the challenges faced by the movement and its support bases in the persistent low-intensity war orchestrated by the state and paramilitary organisations who continue to attack them. In a number of Zapatista communiqués addressed to the “free, alternative, autonomous, or whatever-you-call-it media,” the latter have been recognised as “*compa*

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ganise the relationship between the communities, of the communities with the EZLN and of the communities with the outside world.

media” because they fulfil their duty to inform despite all the difficulties they may encounter whilst doing it. In addition, the hope remains that they will be able “to fill this gap that is occurring in the exchange of information at a global level” (*Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano* 2014: n.p.).

Where, then, do LTC fit in this mediascape? Let us examine some of the elements of their self-definition:

Note: [*Los Tercios Compas*], as their name indicates, are neither media, nor free, nor autonomous, nor alternative, but are rather more of the however-you-call-it type, but they are *compas*... I think. They are a collective dispersed through calendars and geographies, and they would be completely anonymous except that their members’ identity is given away by their rebellious irreverence. They are the EZLN mass media, and they function whenever they can, which is just once in a while. They are made up of human beings and animals, although sometimes you can’t tell the difference between them. They include those who edit texts and images, put them into cyberspace, add and subtract, and sometimes successfully publish something moderately comprehensible. Their logo is a cat-dog putting the rubber stamp where it should always go, that is, below and to the left. (Communiqué by the EZLN, 7th August, 2014).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Online: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2014/08/07/homage-to-the-companero-david-ruiz-garcia-during-the-exchange-between-indigenous-peoples-and-zapatista-peoples-2/>>.



**"LOS TERCIOS COMPAS"**  
**EZLN**

Logo of *Los Tercios Compas*. Source: <<http://naibafologia.blogspot.com/2014/08/los-tercios-compas-del-ezln.html>>.

It is obviously quite difficult to come up with a precise self-definition with all of their usual ironies and plays on words. LTC's refusal to describe themselves as free or autonomous could be part of a mischievous rhetorical style, especially since we know that both freedom and autonomy are values and practices advocated by Zapatismo as basic conditions for a dignified life. But it would make sense to assume that they are not, in fact, free or autonomous, because they are the "mass media of the EZLN," i.e., of the political/military structure of Zapatismo, where they place their loyalty. They are "militants of Zapatista communication" (*Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano* 2014: n.p.).

### ***Los Tercios Compas: Mass Media of the EZLN***

The use of the term "mass media of the EZLN" to describe the work of LTC undoubtedly has a real connotation, but also an ironic one. As the British sociologist John B. Thompson argues in his book *The Media and Modernity*, the reference to the term *mass* "should not be construed in narrowly quantitative terms. The important point about mass communication is [...] that the products are available in principle to a plurality of recipients" (1995: 24). Since its early days, Zapatismo has indeed known how to take advantage of the possibilities of mass diffusion through technical means—the internet—with the support of a growing solidarity network. In cyberspace, it has addressed anti-systemic and counter-hegemonic alternative globalisation networks and, in the process, fostered neo-Zapatista networks across the globe (Leyva 1998). This global reach has been further en-

hanced by the communiqués that these networks circulate on the internet in solidarity with the movement, translated into various European languages such as Basque, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Russian, but also Turkish, Chinese, Japanese, and Indonesian.<sup>7</sup>

There are other characteristics of mass media<sup>8</sup> that are out of tune with the Zapatista approach to communication, which might suggest an ironic use of the term. One of them is the commodification of their contents, since in many cases the mass media are “paid media.” What “underlies the commercial exploitation of the technical media of communication” —such as the printing press since the fifteenth century— is the “reproducibility of symbolic forms [...] [that] can be ‘commodified,’ that is, turned into commodities which are bought and sold in a market” (Thompson 1995: 20). Hence, the commercial viability of the media industry is fostered by increasing the capacity for reproduction and the power to control it through copyright laws (ibid.: 21).

Another characteristic of mass media is the one-way nature of its messages or contents. “[T]he communicative exchanges of face-to-face interaction are fundamentally

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subcomandante\\_Marcos\\_bibliography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subcomandante_Marcos_bibliography)>.

<sup>8</sup> In English and German, the terms *mass media* and *Massenmedien* can ambiguously mean both “massive media for communication” and “communication media for the masses.” This ambiguity is also present in Spanish, where, in addition to these two connotations, there is a third one, “media for massive communication,” each with a differently nuanced emphasis on what is massive —the media, the communication, or the audience.

dialogical. With most forms of mass communication, by contrast, the flow of communication is overwhelmingly one-way” (Thompson 1995: 25). There is no doubt a continuous flow of Zapatista communication from the inside to the outside, but there are also measures to counteract asymmetrical, “monological or unidirectional” communication processes, as Thompson would say (*ibid.*: 25). Among these measures are the national and international (intergalactic, etc.) encounters periodically organised by Zapatismo to create spaces for exchange. And recently, with the Journey for Life, Zapatismo created new spaces for dialogue with members of its own networks and other movements. In addition, on the internet, on the Enlace Zapatista website, there is a comments section that functions as a feedback channel for any communiqué published.

Some reflections are still in order regarding the term *mass*, which can also be misleading in that it “suggests that the recipients of media products constitute a vast sea of passive, undifferentiated individuals” (Thompson 1995: 24). Moreover, there can be “mass deception,” as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2002) put it in their theory of *mass culture* in the 1940s. They observed that, with the rise of the culture and media industries, the masses became uncritical consumers, easily manipulated by the uniform and standardised cultural products of info-entertainment provided by the media —at the time, mainly the press, film, and radio. This critique formulated by Horkheimer and Adorno, based on their experiences in Germany under National Socialist Party rule and later in exile in the United States, has been challenged, made more complex, and contextualised, for example, in studies



on the active and reflexive reception of media products, their use, and their creative incorporation into the lives of consumers. Nonetheless, several of the negative connotations of this critique continue to resonate when talking about mass communication today.

In contrast, Zapatismo addresses its sympathisers, the members of the National and International Sixth and the peoples, organisations, collectives, men, women, and *otroas*<sup>9</sup> who struggle across the different geographies of our planet, not as an undifferentiated and impersonal, passive, uncritical, and manipulable mass, but as a critical mass that can organise to fight injustice, collectively resist exploitation, rebel against ‘projects of death’ produced by the patriarchal/capitalist system, and change the world by constructing alternatives and projects aimed at sustaining life.

### ***Los Tercios Compas: The Silent Struggle***

LTC are *compas* (comrades) who are members of an anonymous collective dispersed in both calendar and geography, regardless of place or territory or the corresponding time zone of its members. They can be indigenous or not, as Insurgent Subcommander Moisés clarified in his speech about being Zapatista: “There are some people who think that we are an organization made up of indigenous people or of Mexicans, but that is not correct. We are an organiza-

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<sup>9</sup> *Otroas* (a hybrid term that combines *otros* and *otras*, i.e., male and female “others”) is the term employed by Zapatismo to denote non-binary gender identifications. (T.N.)

tion of Zapatistas, indigenous and non-indigenous people” (2016: 26). LTC reflect what it is “To Be Zapatista” in their distinguishing features: they work “collectively with the organized communities,” and they do so “organizing and struggling in silence, come what may; that is, it is about theory and practice” (ibid.: 26, 27).

It is worth putting the current development of Zapatista media agency in its historical context. In the early 1990s, when the technological appropriation of video by indigenous people in Mexico was just beginning, peasant or indigenous organisations sent mostly young men, and some women, as their representatives to radio and video production workshops offered by the National Indigenist Institute (*Instituto Nacional Indigenista*, INI) and some NGOs. At the time, in many organisational spaces, the transcendence that the New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT) would acquire was barely perceived. For example, the young trainees returned from the INI’s workshops on Audio-visual Media Transfer to Indigenous Organisations and Communities, held in Mexico City and Oaxaca, with production equipment and some preparation as video makers. However, for the organisations with their own logics and needs it was not easy to provide follow up. In many cases, both the equipment and the talents and newly acquired abilities of these youngsters remained untapped. Nevertheless, some independent peasant and indigenous organisations did create “communication areas” and corresponding positions.

Tensions arose in some communities and organisations, when the young video makers began to play an important role in communal or organisational self-representation

that challenged traditional authorities (see Wortham 2005). Undoubtedly, new positions in media practice were being created: communicator, radio broadcaster, video maker, and photojournalist. This implied inclusion in the organisational structure and required giving them adequate formal recognition. Often, however, this was not achieved.

On one occasion, in a public event, I witnessed how the leader of an organisation referred to the person about to screen one of their videos as their “technician.” Indeed, this man was the organisation’s principal video maker. He was in charge of the communication area and had significantly contributed to the collective memory of their struggle. For more than two decades he had captured on video an important part of their organisational history. In fact, he was responsible for designing the policies on their public image and putting them in audio-visual form. This novel position and leadership in communications policy was not always welcome, because it clashed with established organisational and power structures. However, in Zapatismo, there was support both from within the communities and the political and military organisation of the EZLN which led to the formal creation of a relevant position within the movement’s organisational structure in 2014: *Los Tercios Compas*.

## ***Los Tercios Compas: Audio-Visual Productions***

### ***Stop All Wars. Echoes of Sunday 13***<sup>10</sup>

This is the title of the most recent video by LTC uploaded to the internet, which documents the multitudinous Zapatista marches against war and in favour of life and peace in the world. Thousands of Zapatistas mobilised and marched on 13th March, 2022, in the municipalities of Yajalón, Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, Palenque, Altamirano, and San Cristóbal de Las Casas, in the state of Chiapas. Chanting and on banners, they proclaimed: “Long live life! Long live Mother Earth! Long live humanity! Long live the peoples of the world who struggle! Long live the women of the world who struggle! Death to the capitalist system!” They continually emphasised: “No to war! Stop all wars!” And they linked “capitalist interests” directly to “the terrible destruction of human lives” that affects, above all, women and the poor.

The video, 6’26” minutes long, records the marches that were organised only seventeen days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a further escalation of the war that Russia began in 2014. The video integrates the images and words of the demonstrators, most of them young Zapatistas with balaclavas or bandanas, who marched that day. In visual terms, it highlights the organisational strength of the Zapatista *Caracoles*. Time and again, endless lines of demonstrators are seen approaching the cities on dirt roads and then filling the central streets in two or three lines at a

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<sup>10</sup> Online: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2022/03/14/alto-a-las-guerras-ecos-del-domingo-13/>> and <<https://vimeo.com/688218725>>.

time. The message delivered is of the massive opposition of the Zapatista bases against one of the ills of humanity—the many armed conflicts and, specifically, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. They denounce this invasion as one more of the “unjust wars of capitalism” that “only leave behind horrible destruction of human lives, disabled people, widows, orphans, shortages, hunger, and diseases, and all of it due to capitalist interests!” (1’06”–1’19”).



The Zapatista march passes by the military barracks in Altamirano, Chiapas. Photograph: *Los Tercios Compas*. Source: <<http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2022/03/14/alto-a-las-guerras-ecos-del-domingo-13/>>.

As viewers, we are presented with a powerful demonstration of fraternity, solidarity, and organisational spirit: “We are millions of brothers and sisters in the world who suffer capitalism’s unjust wars. So, let’s organise ourselves!” (1’20”–1’27”). Furthermore, the protesters reveal Zapatismo’s ideological distance from the old guard of the institutional left –not only in Latin America–, which finds it difficult to denounce the injustices of a militaristic regime with whose predecessor it sympathised in the past: “No to capitalism’s war, which murders and conquers the people of Ukraine for economic, political, and ideological interests!” (3’48”–3’59”).

Wake up, people of Mexico and the world! With an organised struggle by men and women for a true peace. [...] It is urgent that we raise our voices and mobilise to support the survival of the Ukrainian and Russian peoples who struggle. They need us today, and we will need them too! (3’17”–3’47”)

Once again, the spirit of the First International Gathering of Politics, Art, Sport, and Culture for Women in Struggle<sup>11</sup> was evident: the overwhelming presence and strength of Zapatista women and girls. During the protest march, they declared:

As Zapatista women, we declare that their pain is our pain.  
As women, let us organise our peoples to mobilise, each in

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<sup>11</sup> This Gathering took place in the *Caracol* Morelia, from 8th to 11th March, 2018. Between 7,000 and 11,000 women from around the world participated in it (Redacción 2018).

her own geography and calendar, in order to stop all unjust wars, because they affect us women the most!

Long live the resistance and rebellion of the Ukrainian people!

Long live the resistance and rebellion of the Russian people!

Death to the capitalist system!

Long live life!

Long live humanity! (4'15"-4'59").

The video closes with a part of the song *Cumbia de la Paz* (Peace Cumbia), by Colombian musicians Chico Cervantes and Diego Balcázar. The song is accompanied by images recorded with a camera mounted on a drone. It flies slowly over the demonstrators, who march from the Andador Eclesiástico to the Plaza de la Paz in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. We no longer hear the people's clamour, because the original audio track is turned off. We only see a slow and silent river of demonstrators spilling into the plaza. It is a dreamlike visual environment with post-apocalyptic overtones; the demonstrators, wrapped in the fog, make their way amidst stores and lifeless mannequins, scarecrows of capitalism, and their consumerist fashions. Suddenly, the drums at the beginning of the song burst in, and the video closes masterfully accompanied by the accordion and the lyrics: "Dreaming a deep dream, where I look at the world with cumbia love."





March "Stop All Wars," San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas. Photograph: Los Tercios Compas. Source: <<http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2022/03/14/alto-a-las-guerras-ecos-del-domingo-13/>>.

### *Choferas*

Three short videos with the title *Choferas* (Female Drivers) were originally presented as teasers for a more extensive documentary, elaborated, directed, and produced by Zapatista women, i.e., by *Las Tercias Compas*. As the title indicates, the protagonists are also women. In *Corto 1* (Short 1),<sup>12</sup> they tell us how they learned to drive cars and trucks, as well as some mechanics, engine operation, and maintenance. Several drivers talk to us while sitting on the driver's seat of a pickup truck. One of them summarises succinctly why they are venturing into this formerly male domain:

Yes, it's important to learn because it's something that women had never done before. And we need to do it because we can't always depend on the men, on the *compañeros*, because we also have to do new things that we have never done. Because we're changing the world, we're changing life" (*Corto 1 Choferas*: 0'47"-1'08").

Then the drivers demonstrate their driving abilities, while we hear, off camera, the comments, laughter, and mockery of a group of men. The short video closes with a young woman's blunt words:

Women and men are worth the same and have the same rights. And the fact that we are indigenous and have the colour of our Mother Earth doesn't mean we can't represent ourselves. Go ahead, women of the earth, we will triumph! (*Corto 1 Choferas*: 2'42"-2'59").

<sup>12</sup> Online: <[https://youtu.be/ZtYorn\\_F7mA](https://youtu.be/ZtYorn_F7mA)>.



Zapatista driver goes on the road. Video still from *Corto 1 Choferas*.  
Source: <[https://youtu.be/ZtYorn\\_F7mA](https://youtu.be/ZtYorn_F7mA)>.

In *Corto 2*,<sup>13</sup> the drivers continue to demonstrate their automotive breakthroughs. They not only know how to drive, but also how to repair cars and trucks. A man exclaims off camera: “Ah, now mechanics!” But the *compañera* in action cuts him short: “It’s not mechanics, it’s electrics!” The video closes with a group of student drivers from different Zapatista *Caracoles*, who declare in front of the camera:

As Zapatista women, we wanted to do this work because we felt that we had the freedom, the right, and the duty to do it. We need to be truly organised. [...] Not only as drivers, as you can see. We have a great deal of work, time, effort, and sacrifice ahead of us to build the new world we talk about. We invite you to struggle with us and organise yourselves as women. We know it’s not easy, but it’s not impossible either (*Corto 2 Choferas: 3’47”–4’30”*).

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<sup>13</sup> Online: <[https://youtu.be/QavRzZun\\_Vw](https://youtu.be/QavRzZun_Vw)>.



It's not mechanics, it's electrics! Video still from *Corto 2 Choferas*.

Source: <[https://youtu.be/QavRzZun\\_Vw](https://youtu.be/QavRzZun_Vw)>.

*Corto 3*<sup>14</sup> begins with the “Zapatista Anthem” played by a group of marimba players, while we see a fleet of red trucks; the women drivers climb up one after the other in the style of an action film. Cut to a driver who carries her daughter in a shawl and is ready to climb with her into the cabin of a new heavy truck, while a group of men wearing bandanas makes a ruckus: “Are you going to drive it? Hahaha.” A woman’s voice intervenes: “*Compañera*, what about your daughter?” One of the men jokes: “Ah, she’s going to put her in the glove compartment.” The scene ends with another driver who, tired of all the jokes, grabs a heavy wrench with which she threatens the mocking macho men and sends them running.

Disclaimer: no men were hurt in the production of this documentary. Well, actually there were, but only in the form of a few blows to the ego. Oh, and also a few who fell over as they were running away from a *compañera* who got pissed off because they were yelling stuff at the women...<sup>15</sup>

All three videos are shot and edited in a simple and direct, no-frills style, with fixed and handheld camera, alternating interviews with action scenes. They decisively point out that more and more women are ready to drive,

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<sup>14</sup> Online: <[https://youtu.be/\\_grEQZKLTZI](https://youtu.be/_grEQZKLTZI)> (uploaded on 13th June, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Taken from <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2019/09/16/from-the-notebook-of-the-cat-dog-preparations-for-the-puy-ta-cux-lejaltic-film-festival-a-comparte-focused-on-dance-and-the-second-international-gathering-for-women-in-struggle/>>.

not only cars, but the fate of humanity (“‘We macho men lost again, oh well. We’ll be back, even if there are fewer of us each time. If yesterday there were thousands of us, today we are a motley contingent trying to avoid the unavoidable.’ SubMarcos [from 6 feet underground].”)<sup>16</sup>

These three videos are reminiscent of one of the dances that caused a stir at the *CompArte*<sup>17</sup> Festival in 2016, with a choreography that celebrated the real progress made by Zapatista women, to the sound of a song with the refrain: Women in front, men behind!<sup>18</sup> They are in tune with what is happening in many social movements, where women are assuming leadership positions. With their ability to formulate the challenges of our times in powerful and moving speeches, they lead processes of resistance, rebellion, struggle, and organisation. They and many other grassroots women are prepared to drive this planet and humanity toward the future. Some men still mock them,

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<sup>16</sup> Taken from <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2019/09/16/from-the-notebook-of-the-cat-dog-preparations-for-the-puy-ta-cux-lejaltic-film-festival-a-comparte-focused-on-dance-and-the-second-international-gathering-for-women-in-struggle/>>.

<sup>17</sup> The *CompArte* Festivals for Humanity held in 2016, 2017, and 2018, were gatherings for sharing the art production of Zapatistas and their solidarity networks, including theatre and other performances, music, poetry, and plastic arts. The title *CompArte* refers to the verb *share* (*comparte*), but also to *comrade* (*compa*) and art (*arte*) (for more information on the festivals, see <[https://radiozapatista.org/?page\\_id=16981](https://radiozapatista.org/?page_id=16981)>).

<sup>18</sup> Online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ne75EaitbU>> (uploaded on 13th June, 2016).

or worse, respond with all the violence of the patriarchal system, but women are already making inroads into domains previously reserved for men, and no one is going to stop them. It is the time of women and original peoples...

### **Journey for Life**

Of course, LTC were present with their cameras on 30th April, 2021, when the maritime Zapatista delegation, Squadron 421, boarded *La Montaña* (The Mountain), the ship that took them to Europe to begin the Journey for Life. LTC published a series of photographs and two short videos to document the departure. The first video, *Preparing the Boarding*,<sup>19</sup> completely dispenses with the original sound of the recordings. The soundtrack is *Aires bucaneros* (Buccaneer Winds), a song recorded in 1979 by the eponymous group led by Puerto Rican musician Roy Brown. The song's lyrics are borrowed from the poet Luis Palés Matos, also Puerto Rican and one of the acclaimed members of *Negrismo* (Blackness), a literary movement that emerged in the Antilles in the early-twentieth century. *Negrismo* celebrated Black culture with its joys and tribulations from the perspective of the colonised. The verses of *Aires bucaneros* extol, with sonority and musicality, the natural, economic, and spiritual wealth of the Greater Caribbean. But they mix it with “a haughty and thunderous denunciation” of this area “as a space coveted and mistreated by the colonial countries—the buccaneers—,” and its victimisation at the hands of Spain and later the United States (Jiménez 2018:

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<sup>19</sup> Online: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/05/06/the-boarding/>> and <[vimeo.com/544131363](https://vimeo.com/544131363)>.



64–65). The end of the poem and of the song displays Palés's political vision:

The Viceroy's arrogant guards  
cover the flanks, close the rear.  
Ay, caravan in the hands  
of Spanish military lancers!

Against it storm the buccaneers,  
machetes slashing, bullets exact,  
as the Spanish lion's booty passes  
to the Americas' shrewd tiger (Palés Matos 2000: 103).

To the melodic sound of an acoustic guitar, we hear the lyrical voices of Roy Brown and Zoraida Santiago evoking the delights offered by Caribbean territories to the buccaneer's delirium. The video's images present us with the sunlit coast of Isla Mujeres in Quintana Roo. We see Squadron 421 and company, amid smiles and greetings to the public, board the dinghy that would take them to the ship. They take with them a few artistic objects produced for the Journey for Life: dugout canoes decorated with ancient Mayan motifs and others portraying the life and struggle of Zapatista communities. The four-minute video ends with the following stanza found in the middle of the poem: "Give the buccaneer virgin lands, ungoverned waters, uncharted sea; the horizon housing the howl of a gnarling dog-pack storm" (Palés Matos 2000: 99). The poetic figures that exalt Caribbean treasures and delights clash with allegories that denounce the voracity of the colonial powers. It is surely not a fortuitous coincidence

that the video closes with the metaphor of a *storm*, which, as I shall explain below, resonates with the conceptual, anti-imperialist and anti-systemic Zapatista pluriverse.

In January 1994, the “Press and Propaganda Department, EZLN” published a text by Insurgent Subcommander Marcos written in August 1992 in the Lacandon Forest, called “Chiapas: The Southeast in Two Winds: A Storm and a Prophecy.”<sup>20</sup> In it, he speaks of “The First Wind: The One from Above,” referring to the pillage of Chiapas’ wealth, “the thousand and one fangs of plunder digging into the throat of the Mexican southeast”: raw materials such as wood and oil, coffee, cattle, honey, hydroelectric energy. The “beast” of capitalism takes them and leaves behind poverty and a lack of education, health, industry, and communication in its wake. What were “Buccaneer Winds” for Palés in colonial and postcolonial times, becomes the wind of the beast unleashed by late-twentieth-century global capitalism for Zapatismo.

Subsequently, Insurgent Subcommander Marcos speaks of “The Second Wind: The One from Below,” and “how dignity and rebellion come together in the southeast,” how people survive and resist there with collective work, democratic thought, compliance with the agreements made by the majority.

The storm is here. From the clash of these two winds the storm will be born, its time has arrived. Now the wind from above

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<sup>20</sup> Available in English at: <<https://schoolsforchiapas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/The-Southeast-in-Two-Winds-A-Storm-and-a-Prophecy.pdf>>.

rules, but the wind from below is coming... (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Marcos 1992: penultimate paragraph).

In a more recent communiqué, the metaphor of the storm acquires a different meaning:

[S]o the thing is that we, the Zapatistas, see and hear a catastrophe coming, and we mean that in every sense of the term, a perfect storm. [...] We see that what is coming is something terrible, even more destructive than before, if that's possible. But we also see that those who think and analyse aren't saying anything about this (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Galeano 2015a: The Storm section).

To reflect collectively on this impending catastrophe, the Zapatistas organised “a seedbed of ideas, of analysis, of critical thinking about how the capitalist system currently works” (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Galeano 2015a: The Storm section). The seminar “Critical Thought versus the Capitalist Hydra” was thus held in the *Caracol* Oventik from 3rd to 9th May, 2015.

After talking and listening, we came to the conclusion that what we saw was the same thing: a profound crisis is approaching, [...] a storm. [...] An economic crisis like never before. What we are seeing now are just the very first rains. The worst is yet to come. [...] it turns out that it's not only an economic crisis. One has also to consider the crisis from the angle of unnatural environmental disasters, seeing them for what they are, the effects of an unnatural cause: the transformation of everything, including the most basic and elementary things

—water, air, sun, shade, earth and sky— into commodities (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Galeano 2016: 182).

To continue the conversation about the storm and the Capitalist Hydra with others in resistance and rebellion in Europe, the Journey for Life was organised. The proposal:

to confront our analyses and conclusions with others who fight and think critically. [...] to thank others for [...] the teachings that their rebellion and resistance have given us. [...] To embrace others and whisper in their ear that they are not alone. To whisper that the resistance, struggle and pain [...] are worth it (*Subcomandante Insurgente* Galeano 2021: penultimate paragraph).



*Los Tercios Compas* fulfil their duty to watch us with our own gaze. Photograph: *Los Tercios Compas*. Source: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/05/01/el-abordaje/>>.

The second video, called *The Boarding*,<sup>21</sup> lasts 4'43" minutes and is accompanied by *Memoria da noite* (Memory of the Night), a song by the Galician band Luar na Lubre.<sup>22</sup> The lyrics of the song are about the oil tanker MV *Prestige*, which sank with 77,000 tons of heavy fuel oil in 2002. The song became an anthem for social struggle. It enshrines the pressure of the Galician popular movement *Nunca Máis* (Never Again) to call for environmental, legal, and political responsibilities for the disaster.<sup>23</sup> The song's poetic verses also seem to foreshadow the arrival and landing of Squadron 421 in Vigo on the Galician coast:

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<sup>21</sup> Online: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/05/06/the-boarding/>> and <[vimeo.com/544120007](https://vimeo.com/544120007)>.

<sup>22</sup> “*Luar* is Galician for *moonlight*; *lubre* is a magical forest in which the Celtic druids cast their spells.” Taken from <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luar\\_na\\_Lubre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luar_na_Lubre)>.

<sup>23</sup> “The ***Prestige oil spill*** occurred off the coast of Galicia, Spain, in November 2002, caused by the sinking of the 26-year-old, structurally deficient oil tanker MV *Prestige* [...] During a storm, it burst a tank on 13 November, and French, Spanish, and Portuguese governments refused to allow the ship to dock. The vessel subsequently sank on 19 November, about 210 kilometres (130 miles) from the coast of Galicia. [...] The oil spill polluted 2300 kilometres (1429 miles) of coastline and more than one thousand beaches on the Spanish, French and Portuguese coast, as well as causing great harm to the local fishing industry. The spill is the largest environmental disaster in the history of both Spain and Portugal.” Taken from <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prestige\\_oil\\_spill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prestige_oil_spill)>.

*Porque nós arrancamos todo o orgulho do mar, non nos afundi-remos nunca máis. Que na túa memoria xa non hai volta atrás: non nos humillaredes NUNCA MÁIS.*

Because we tore all the pride from the sea, we shall never sink again. That in your memory, there is no turning back: You shall NEVER humiliate us again (last verse of the song *Memoria da noite*. Lyrics by Xabier Cordal).

Both videos deftly combine still photography and video recordings to document the events, and are edited in the style of music videos. For photography editing, the so-called “Ken Burns effect” is employed—a combination of panning and zooming in or out, applied to a still photograph to give it a sense of smooth camera movement. This effect is used in films that rely heavily on still images to bring them to life. Or, for example, to highlight one person in a group photograph by slowly zooming in on their face.<sup>24</sup>

The selection of songs in the two videos demonstrates familiarity with various musical traditions on both sides of the Atlantic. It also reveals a particular skill in harmonising the videos’ visual contents with musical themes and rebellious, thought-provoking lyrics. Both the genres of the songs and their lyrics convey meanings derived from other times—the 1970s and the early-twenty-first century—and

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<sup>24</sup> This effect is named after North American documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, although he did not invent the technique. In the 1990s, Burns gained popularity with this style of working with archival images and still photographs. Since then, it has become part of the aesthetic repertoire of many documentaries and visual presentations with various applications.

other geographical contexts than Chiapas —the Greater Caribbean and Galicia. However, the lyrical connotations, ironies, and poetic contrasts can touch and move us at different levels, whether consciously or subconsciously, depending on our cultural knowledge and musical tastes.

The musical theme of the second video, *The Boarding*, also reflects one of the strengths of the Zapatista movement: its capacity to connect with social movements and their causes in other geographies of the planet. In this case, with a very important environmental movement related to the coast to which the delegation sailed; a movement whose name —*Nunca Más*— resonates with two central Zapatista slogans: “Never again a Mexico without us!” and “Never again a world without us!”

### **The Revolutionary Music Video as a Zapatista Mode of Communication**

These two videos, created to launch the Journey for Life, challenge and defy a format of capitalist cultural consumption and lead it in an unexpected direction. I would like to think that it is a mode of autonomous Zapatista audio-visual communication under development. In formal terms, these videos correspond to what we know as music videos. They have a moving image track recorded by LTC and a soundtrack consisting of a non-Zapatista song. They are short and last the length of the whole song or a significant part of it.

There is another LTC video with many views on YouTube that is a kind of pilot for this Zapatista mode of audio-visual communication, which we could call *Zapatista revolutionary music video*. It was published on 16th March, 2017, lasts four



minutes, and is called *La primera de varias. Café Zapatista* (The First of Several. Zapatista Coffee).<sup>25</sup> It documents the processes of organic “Collective Inter-Zone Zapatista Coffee” production in the five *Caracoles* in existence at the time.<sup>26</sup> It combines —like the other examples examined above— still photographs and video recordings focusing, in this case, on the processes of harvesting, drying, roasting, and packing the coffee, while on the soundtrack plays *Somos Sur* (We are South), a fusion rap piece by the Chilean-French singer Ana Tijoux, accompanied by the Palestinian-British rapper Shadia Mansour. The song’s lyrics in Spanish and Arabic express a clear anti-imperialist stance with a number of references to Zapatismo:

We dared to dream that the empire fell  
We shouted aloud, no choice but to yell  
This isn’t utopia, but rebellion ashine  
The dance of the outcasts, a dance that is yours and mine  
Enough!, rising up we proclaim  
Latin America and Africa are not up for sale  
[...]  
We are Africans, Latin Americans  
We are the south and we join our hands  
The silenced, the conquered, the people unseen.

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<sup>25</sup> Online: <<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2017/03/17/the-first-of-many/>> and <[youtube.com/watch?v=6ZnYPHUoLb8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZnYPHUoLb8)>.

<sup>26</sup> In August 2019, seven new *Caracoles* were inaugurated, making a total of twelve.



Visual representation included in the CD *Vengo* by Ana Tijoux. Source: *Gráfica Diablo Rojo*. Taken from: <[https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figura-5-Mujer-con-capucha-amamantando-a-su-hijo-Credito-Grafika-Diablo-Rojo\\_fig2\\_344703170](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figura-5-Mujer-con-capucha-amamantando-a-su-hijo-Credito-Grafika-Diablo-Rojo_fig2_344703170)>.

The video opens with the song's invigorating theme played by a set of wind instruments, while white letters appear on a black background, announcing: "AGAINST THE WALLS," followed by "ALL THE CRACKS" in red letters, a slogan that seems to have been inspired by John Holloway's book *Crack Capitalism* (2010). The book is organised as a series of theses. Let me highlight some of them: "Our method is the method of the crack" (thesis 2, p. 8); "The cracks begin with a No, from which there grows dignity, a negation-and-creation" (thesis 4, p. 17); "Dignity is our weapon against a world of destruction" (thesis 8, p. 49); "The cracks are the revolt of one form of doing against another: the revolt of doing against labour" (thesis 11, p. 83);<sup>27</sup> and "We are the forces of production: our power is the power of doing" (thesis 30, p. 245). These are theses that, in my interpretation, can be seen in practice, in the concrete and autonomous act of cultivating coffee, processing it in the facilities of *Yochin Tayel K'inál*, Organisation of Indigenous Tseltal, Tsotsil, and Tojolabal Producers, and packing it for distribution in solidarity to support migrants and displaced persons. Thesis 10, "Cracks exist [...] Moving they exist: dignity is a fleet-footed dance" (p. 71) is beautifully expressed in the *Somos Sur* music video which

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<sup>27</sup> Summarising, Holloway proposes a human *doing* imbued with the desire for freedom from the slavery of capitalist alienated *labour*, an *other-doing* in the world as "an activity that is not shaped by the rules of power," in "a place of self-determination, refusing to let money (or any other alien force) determine what we do" (2010: 3, 21).

is full of images with women and men from indigenous communities dancing with dignity.<sup>28</sup>

The collective production of Café Tatawelo is summarised in *The First of Several...*; the edition of the images is agile and moves, dances, to the rhythm of the music, sometimes emulating and sometimes contrasting with it. The video transitions applied are those that usually appeal to beginners in video editing —cubes, wipes, curtains, spins, waves—, which is not surprising, given that LTC had just been born. Differently from commercial music videos, which sport a format between publicity and fragmented stories, promote songs by popular artists, and display the latest fashions, novel visual aesthetics and editing techniques, the emphasis in *The First of Several...* is on the construction of international solidarity, not on its looks.

The video closes panning down a poster with the heading “Collective Inter-zone ZAPATISTA Coffee” and a reproduction of a painting by Beatriz Aurora, as well as a text below that reads as follows:

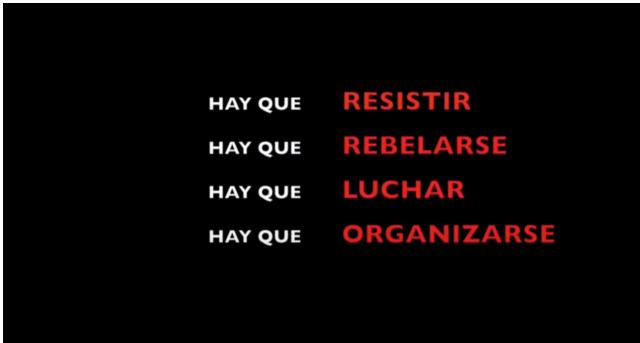
To begin with, we will send you artworks created by Zapatista indigenous artists for the *CompArte* last year, as well as organic coffee produced by the Zapatista indigenous communities in the mountains of the Mexican southeast, so that, with its sale, you can carry out artistic and cultural activities to support migrants and displaced people around the world, whose lives, freedom, and goods are threatened by the xenophobic cam-

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<sup>28</sup> Online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKGUJXzxNqc&t=205s>>.

paigns promoted by governments and the far right around the world.

Instead of credits, we see a slogan scroll up. On a black background, the text reminds us how to crack the walls.



Video still from *The First of Several. Zapatista Coffee.*

YOU HAVE TO RESIST

YOU HAVE TO REBEL

YOU HAVE TO STRUGGLE

YOU HAVE TO GET ORGANISED

Source: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZnYPHUoLb8>>.

As the video's "message," we are left with *other-doing* instead of capitalist alienated *labour*—a non-capitalist practice in action and solidarity, or, in Holloway's words:

Comradeship, dignity, amorosity, love, solidarity, fraternity, friendship, ethics: all these names stand in contrast to the commodified, monetised relations of capitalism, all describe relations developed in struggles against capitalism and which can be seen as anticipating or creating a society beyond capitalism. They stand in contrast to the commodified relations of capitalism not as timeless alternatives, but as struggle-against. (2010: 43).

Returning to the analysis of what I have called an autonomous Zapatista mode of audio-visual communication, let me compare it with the hegemonic production of music videos, in terms of form and content, structure and objective. When the music video had already been established as an audio-visual format for cultural consumption,<sup>29</sup> Pat Aufderheide, a North American researcher of media and social change, analysed it in the following terms: "Music videos invent the world they represent," and one of their objectives is to engulf the viewer in "an alternative world where image is reality," i.e., "a wondrous leisure world" with experiences and "a series of mood states" associated with commercial music and youth pop culture (1986: 58, 62–63, 77). Regarding visual representation, the music

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<sup>29</sup> There are precursors to the music video since the 1930s, but it was in the 1970s that it developed as a genre, first in television programs, later expanding into a wide range of media platforms.

video format is premised on “the constant permutation of identity in a world without social relationships” (ibid.: 77). Its narrative structures correspond to those of dreams or fantasies without “beginnings or endings —no history” marked by discontinuities, and some music videos’ occasional attempts at raising social issues are usually lost in “disjunctive images and dreamy fantasy” (ibid.: 65–66, 73).

Although the genre of music videos continues to develop, Aufderheide’s arguments highlight some basic characteristics that stand in marked contrast with the examples of the Zapatista revolutionary music video discussed above. Zapatista videos attempt to represent a real —not imaginary— world of social and political organisation. One tangible objective is to encourage and raise —not engulf— the viewer, with an invitation to participate in the construction of an alternative world to that of capitalist consumption, through action in solidarity to confront concrete injustices, with the potential to articulate struggles.

The Zapatista revolutionary music video visualises a particular struggle —its own. But, through the soundtrack, it simultaneously connects to other struggles and movements engaged in the construction of dignified alternatives to colonialism and global capitalism in other times and geographies. The assembly of images, lyrics, and music produces audio-visual synaesthesia and makes complex historical articulations resonate and come to light —between struggles of the past and the present, or among local histories of resistance and rebellion in different geographies. On an emotional level, it appeals to collective and shared identities of struggle. The dreams expressed in the Zapatista revolutionary music video have nothing to do



with daydreaming, with fantasies disconnected from reality; rather, they are concerned with particular and shared horizons of struggle.

It is not my intention to reduce the Zapatista music video merely to a “subversion” of the hegemonic music video format. It goes beyond that, because it shows us that it is possible to build another world, while appealing to our capacity for solidarity and combining audio-visual innovation with political meaning, defiant emotion, and critical reflection.

## **By Way of Conclusion**

In their productions, LTC are not reinventing the wheel. The practical rules of dominant audio-visual language have already been established, although, of course, with cultural nuances in the various national traditions, audio-visual genres and grammars. However, with Zapatismo’s emphasis on its own gaze, its media practices built on solidarity, the anonymity of its producers, and the novel audio-visual meanings it conveys, which break with the capitalist click-bait media economy, the Zapatista movement is showing us once again a creative, autonomous path to crack the capitalist system and seek ways out of it.

Building autonomy is at the heart of the Zapatista movement. This *de facto* autonomous construction is gradually permeating all spheres of Zapatista life. LTC’s audio-visual communication establishes Zapatista media autonomy as an integral part of the living and holistic construction of autonomy that involves the entire movement.

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## About the Collection

The Al Faro Zapatista Collection is a tribute to Zapatista women, children, elders, *otroas*, and men in their more than 500 years of resistance and 30 years of insurgent public life. This initiative seeks to embrace the Journey for Life. We do it as who we are: social science workers, activated activists.

We do it, because Zapatismo has been the beacon for many of us and other inhabitants of planet Earth. It is the lighthouse in the middle of The Storm whipped up by what the Zapatista women called, in 2017, the “sexist and patriarchal capitalist system.” This is a system fuelled by racism and “cisheteronormativity,” as the sexual diversities in movement and re-existence call it.

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## AL FARO ZAPATISTA COLLECTION

Building autonomy is at the heart of the Zapatista movement and this de facto construction of autonomy is gradually permeating all spheres of Zapatista life. The audio-visual communication of *Los Tercios Compas*, the “mass media of the EZLN”, establishes Zapatista media autonomy as an integral part of the living and holistic construction of autonomy that involves the entire movement.

This book starts with the collective and anonymous gaze of *Los Tercios Compas* (LTC). This is a critical Zapatista gaze that communicates and reflects on the processes of the movement from within. Next you will find a discussion of what it means to be the “mass media of the EZLN” and how LTC subvert the hegemonic communication of the “paid media.” I continue with a reflection on Zapatista media agency in its historical context and on the silent struggle of LTC. The last part is dedicated to an analysis of several of LTC’s audio-visual productions and closes with an emergent mode of autonomous Zapatista audio-visual communication. I suggest that we can identify this mode as “Zapatista revolutionary music video.” I conclude that the subversion of the hegemonic music video genre by the Zapatistas is yet another instance that reveals the possibility of building another world together and in solidarity.

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